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The 21st Century Teacher

[Manzoor Ahmed](#)

World Teachers' Day, held annually on October 5 since 1994, celebrates teachers and their role in meeting the needs of future generations. The Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), collaborating with teachers' organisations, has planned nationwide activities for the day. The theme this year is “teaching for sustainable development”, in keeping with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) proclaimed by the United Nations in September.

Teachers and their institutions are caught in turmoil in Bangladesh. Teachers at all levels, from primary schools to universities, are engaged these days in work stoppage, rallies and other protest actions. They seem to regard these steps as the only way to draw the attention of policymakers to their plight and problems in the education system.

George Bernard Shaw, in his satirical play *Man and Superman*, had a character declare, “He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.” Arguably, Shaw's tongue-in-cheek observation is close to the contemporary reality in many developing countries.

Teaching, unfortunately, is the last occupational choice for college graduates in Bangladesh. It is doubtful that many parents today would wish their children to grow up to become a primary or secondary school teacher. In contrast, teaching is one of the highest paid occupations for university graduates in Germany, Korea, Switzerland, Spain and Singapore, and a coveted profession in most OECD countries.

An average primary teacher's family income in Bangladesh is significantly below the poverty line if the teacher has to look after a four-member family with her/his salary. It is not surprising that countries in South Asia, including Bangladesh, do not even participate in international assessments such as PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) to measure basic competence of a 15-year-old in subjects like Language, Math and Science.

Remuneration and incentives are not the sole determinants of a teacher's performance and a student's learning outcome, but these have to be key considerations in national educational development planning.

Few will disagree with the premise that a major obstacle to achieving quality with equity in the education system, as envisaged in Education Policy 2010, is professional and personal capabilities and attributes of teachers.

A vicious cycle, of teachers with limited capability and poor motivation producing students from primary and secondary schools who are ill-prepared for higher education, is at work. They in turn become low-capability teachers, thus repeating the cycle. A way has to be found to break this cycle and attract the “best and the brightest” of young people into teaching and retain them in the profession.

This is a daunting task and there is no quick-fix. But a beginning has to be made to initiate change so that we do not have the same discussion ten years from now. Global experience of addressing this challenge suggests possibilities from which we must learn.

A national teacher development initiative, with at least a 10-year perspective, has to be initiated. This will include several key elements related to professional preparation of would-be teachers, creating the conditions for enforcing quality standards in teachers' preparation and working conditions, attracting capable young people into teaching, and ensuring that they are valued and supported to perform their job effectively.

The development and implementation of the inter-connected components will require various key measures.

A pre-service teacher preparation programme should be incorporated into the undergraduate degree programme with education as a subject. Unlike many countries, Bangladesh does not have a pre-service teacher education programme, although school teaching is the single largest field of employment for college graduates.

Education as a discipline can be introduced in selected degree colleges under the National University, by working out the academic programme and syllabus, faculty qualifications and degree requirements. Students will receive a BA or BSc degree depending on the combination of other subjects taken along with Education as the core subject. Students fulfilling specified requirements will receive a teaching certificate or diploma, along with the degree, as is the practice in many countries.

Academic and other quality standards required by National University and UGC (hardly enforced at present) have to be strictly enforced in selected colleges for this initiative. Financial and personnel provisions have to be made for this purpose under a special project.

A National Teaching Service Corps (NTSC), with attractive remuneration and status, is seen as a key step that will create a national cadre of teachers who, in a few years, will create a nucleus of quality education personnel in our schools and bring about a qualitative change in teaching and learning.

In the face of competition for entry into reputed degree colleges, the prospect of a general degree and some incentives (stipends) will attract good students to the Education course, even if they have to sign a five-year bond to serve as a teacher. Induction into the NTSC would be an added attraction.

The hidden agenda is that after serving as a teacher for five years, and because of the attraction of the NTSC, many young people will continue in the teaching profession.

Other than qualified graduates of the new undergraduate course of Education, current teachers with outstanding performance and qualifications meeting set criteria could also be inducted into the NTSC.

The Education undergraduate course could be started on a trial basis in ten degree colleges and in phases extended to one or two degree colleges in every district. A beneficial fallout of this initiative, if properly implemented, would be to show the way for a qualitative change in undergraduate Education programme of the National University.

This initiative calls for out-of-the-box thinking. It has the chance of succeeding only with high level interest and commitment of the policymakers. The development and trial may attract donor support, but ultimately its effective implementation, replication, and sustainability will depend on policy support and the willingness to commit regular resources from the education budget.

The proposed 10-year plan is not a substitute for addressing several immediate concerns which agitate teachers and impede school performance. These concerns must be handled with sensitivity and goodwill by both policymakers and teacher organisations.

It is said that a teacher is like a candle – it consumes itself to light the way for others. The candle must be kept alight.

The writer is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.